

# Stakeholder Consultation on Secondary Plan Development for the South Basin Lake Manitoba Planning Area

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## **Context**

The South Basin of Lake Manitoba is a unique and important area. The Delta Marsh ecosystem is one of the largest wetlands in North America, providing habitat for thousands of migrating birds and wildlife. Many people come to the area to enjoy the recreational opportunities year-round. The plentiful prime agricultural and grazing lands have provided indispensable resources and livelihoods for farmers and residents.

The Portage la Prairie Planning District is in the process of creating a development plan and accompanying zoning by-laws for the Rural Municipality of Portage la Prairie, as required by the Planning Act (January 1, 2006). It became evident when creating the Development Plan that a Secondary Plan was needed for the South Basin Lake Manitoba area to help the Rural Municipal Council and stakeholders cope with the complexity of the situation in the South Basin. The Portage la Prairie Planning District sought the services of a Planning Consultant to assist them in the development of the Secondary Plan. Completing this task required a comprehensive stakeholder consultation process.

The Department of City Planning in the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Manitoba, in cooperation with masters-level students in the planning program, took on the task of developing a draft of the Secondary Plan for the Rural Municipal Council. Since January, the students have been researching issues and concerns in the area, and have been speaking with area residents and stakeholders to determine policy directions for the plan. Subsequently, the Portage la Prairie Planning District will undertake further consultations with government representatives and the general public as needed.

## **Purpose**

To understand stakeholder perspectives on selected policies guiding development in the South Basin Area of Lake Manitoba.

To determine the level of support stakeholders have for the policies.

## **Process Summary**

The event was hosted by Community Planning Services in the Intergovernmental Affairs section of the Government of Manitoba. It was held at the Canad Inns, Portage la Prairie, on Friday, February 15, 2008 from 9:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Some 47 stakeholders attended, including 44 men and 3 women. About 53% were local stakeholders including farmers, cottagers, residents, recreational users, and landowners. Another 38% were government officials, including councillors from the rural municipality and representatives of various provincial government departments. In addition, some 15 students and 4 faculty also attended. They acted as the facilitators throughout the event, under the general coordination of the lead facilitator from Carleton University.

The event began with welcome addresses followed by introductions. Participants were initially seated in a large circle. They introduced themselves by moving around the circle from person to person, shaking hands and briefly stating their role in the South Basin area. People with multiple roles were asked to refer to a single role of their choosing for the purpose of the introductions. This

information was used by participants to self-organize into groups with a similar profile. Each group named themselves using a mascot such as a plant, animal or bird from the South Basin area and explained their reasons for selecting the mascot. The diversity of stakeholders in the room was noted, thereby reinforcing the multi-stakeholder nature of the meeting.

Subsequently, the eight policies forming the main topic for discussion were presented and participants were asked to join tables with policies of interest to them and where they felt they could make a contribution. Four tables were created to discuss two different policies per table. The group mascots were used to adjust the mix of participants so that each table represented the full range of stakeholder groups. A student-facilitator joined each table along with a scribe for taking notes on detailed discussions. Other student-facilitators and faculty joined tables as needed. As the number of participants greatly exceeded expectations, one table was divided into two for the initial discussion and recombined subsequently (see Process Observations, below).

Each table discussed two policies in turn for about 20 minutes each, focusing on two guiding questions: How can we make this policy work well? What problems might people encounter with this policy? Participants were asked to write their responses to the questions on cards, noting one specific idea per card. Each table had been assigned a set of post-it cards of a different color. The written ideas were then shared one at a time and posted by the facilitator to a poster for each policy. The ideas were organized into two columns, one corresponding to the “how to” recommendations and the other to the “problems might encounter” list.

Participants were also asked to propose one crazy or silly idea that other tables would be asked to spot, adding a fun and competitive element to the process. The discussion continued until all ideas were shared or time reached.

After two policies were discussed at each table and the time was completed a participant-presenter was identified by the group to take the results to other tables. Other participants stayed with their table while the presenter and a student-facilitator traveled to each table for about 20 minutes to present the discussion highlights and request feedback or comment from the receiving table. The comments provided were added to the poster, using card colors from that table.

The presentations and feedback continued in rounds until all tables had received presenters from all tables. The presenters then returned to their original tables and briefly shared with their group highlights of the comments they had received. A final plenary discussion focused on these comment highlights or key questions that still needed to be answered.

A round of feedback on the event was received by asking participants to say, in one word, how they were feeling after having engaged in the day’s activities. Final words of thanks were given by a representative of the student-facilitators, flagging as well their intention to consult further and share the results of their research. The meeting was closed by the event host.

## **Analysis**

Introductions resulted in the formation of six or seven groups made up of a varied number of participants with the same or similar roles in the South Basin area. The process showed the diversity of stakeholders present in the room and the multi-stakeholder nature of a land-use planning process.

The stakeholder groups included councillors, commercial fishers, farmers, cottage owners, wind farm interests, recreational users, and conservationists.

### **Presentation Points and Comments on the Policies for the South Basin Area of Lake Manitoba**

Planning in the South Basin Area of Lake Manitoba is guided by the Portage la Prairie Planning District Development Plan, a planning document to be adopted by the Rural Municipal Council (RMC). The Plan establishes a number of general policies for the South Basin Lake Manitoba area, which were discussed in detail at stakeholder tables. Following are the main points for each policy made at the tables responsible for leading the discussion on the policy, and comments gathered from participants at the other tables.

#### *1. Protect and preserve prime agricultural lands, viable lower class lands, and existing agricultural operations.*

The discussion relating to protecting agricultural lands was lively, though with little fundamental disagreement. The group seemed to feel strongly that it is important to protect prime agricultural lands and that this should be a policy priority.

One problem identified was flooding of farm land due to high lake levels. Participants raised concerns about the high saline levels in the flood waters and the way in which Hydro Manitoba controls the lake water levels. Another problem noted by participants was the loss of grazing areas for area cattle producers. A third was a concern over recreational uses of farm land, particularly snowmobiling in the winter and hiking, dogs, and ATVs in the summer, due to detrimental effects on crops. Participants at the various tables also expressed a general consensus that wind farms and cottages should not be placed on prime agricultural soils (see below).

One of the water quality experts present noted that technically it is better to site intensive livestock operations on the best agricultural lands, as these provide better filtration and protection of the water table than do lower class lands, but also that people prefer to live on better quality lands. This presents a conflict in terms of potential land uses.

Solutions to these issues fall into a few different areas. General solutions to maintain existing farmland included:

- Ensuring development co-exists and is compatible with existing land uses;
- Limiting the numbers of people and livestock in particular areas; and
- Differentiating between livestock operations and other agricultural operations due to their differing impacts on the area.

Participants also noted that educational tools could be used to reduce the impacts of recreational use of farmland, as could better signage informing people that they are traveling on farmland.

Participants suggested that new zoning categories and conditional use could be used to allow small manufacturing on farms. This was seen as a potential benefit to local farmers that would allow them to adapt and diversify in response to current and future economic conditions. They also said that development that is not farm related should be avoided or not allowed on prime agricultural lands.

Another action suggested by participants was to integrate a watershed management plan with the secondary plan, to address concerns with lake water quality. Participants also suggested that it is important to recognize the problems caused by concentrated usage of any land use kind (including residential and intensive livestock operations), and to develop areas where concentrations can occur and areas where concentrations shouldn't occur (e.g. standards per acre).

Finally, the participants suggested that a restrictive covenant or caveat be incorporated in residential developments. They felt that there is a need to better educate people about rural realities when they move from an urban setting to a rural setting, to mitigate land use conflicts. Policies for this area need to reflect rural realities, not urban ones.

Immediate actions and key questions raised in plenary were:

- To create an educational and signage campaign to remind people not to trespass when using the area for recreation.
  - How can diversification on farm in small manufacturing/commercial operations be dealt with through zoning or conditional use?
2. *Protect the physical features and environmental processes contributed by the south shore beach ridges and marshes which ameliorate the erosion forces of Lake Manitoba and help sustain the south basin's unique natural habitats and high quality agricultural soils in Portage la Prairie.*

Participants at the table looking at this policy shared the view that the marshes and beach ridges are unique natural features that need to be protected. They noted that there is currently very limited potential for lakefront development, due to lack of available land. Concerns were also raised about the impacts of development on the sand ridges and on water quality. Participants said that deregulating management of levels of the lake waters would help further protect the marsh and help reduce erosion of the sand ridges but they also noted that this would put the cottages at risk from flooding and could negatively affect recreational activities on the lake. The participants discussed various other eco-system concerns including the effect of the carp on water quality and marsh health, the impact of the Portage Diversion on the marsh and related erosion issues of the sand ridge and beach area.

The participants felt strongly that the wording of the policy was unclear. One specific concern in this regard was that the reference to agricultural soils was misleading and should be removed from the policy. They said that the agricultural soils are too far away to be affected by development of the marshes and the beach ridges; conversely, other participants said that their farms have quality soil right up to the marsh. There was much discussion concerning the need to clarify and coordinate jurisdictions over conservation issues as there are many different departments and levels of government responsible for different aspects of conservation of the physical features and environmental processes in the area.

Many solutions were offered. Firstly, many participants said that any new policy needs to allocate funding for environmental protection. They suggested as well that the secondary plan contain detailed mapping information and designations which would help to guide the Rural Municipal Council in decision making. Some participants mentioned that the policy needs to distinguish between

existing development and new developments which impact on natural features. Lastly, the group recommended that incentives be created to upgrade waste management systems which impact natural features.

Key questions raised in plenary included:

- Should this policy contain references to recreation and other issues?
- Should agricultural soils be removed from the policy?

*3. Recognise the importance of the existing land uses such as the Delta Waterfowl Research Station, University of Manitoba Field Station and the Portage Country Club.*

Two key stakeholders, from the University of Manitoba Field Station and the Delta Waterfowl Research Station, were missing from the consultation. Their perspectives were needed to provide context regarding the potential impact of area development on the research stations; without their presence, there was not much discussion of this policy. The important areas named by the group were the marsh (particularly for its role in protecting bird and wildlife habitat), existing agricultural lands, and the snowmobile trails (250 km of trails, of which 100 km are located in the marsh).

Actions that could be taken to protect the marsh and the existing land uses mentioned by the participants included eliminating the carp (through fish screens, electric fences, financial incentives and markets for fish), and allowing the water to flow more freely between the lake and the marsh.

Key questions raised in plenary were:

- There are a variety of land uses and issues in the area (commercial hunting, recreational hunting, the marsh, the Delta Beach, filtration from the diversion). What will happen to these uses in the future?

*4. Maintain the existing seasonal resort recreational development areas located on the south shore of lake Manitoba*

The discussion around this policy focused primarily around recreational issues, area campgrounds, boat docking facilities, the effect of the Portage Diversion on the area, and protecting the beach ridge from erosion. Some of the participants who are residents of the Delta Beach area expressed concern that there is a lack of a clear recreational plan for the South Basin. Other participants wanted to see an expansion of public access points so that the area could be used recreationally year round. Some participants also said the restoration of the marsh is an ongoing need and concern. They felt that the restoration of the marsh continues to be “forgotten” and there needs to be an active effort to make it a public priority. Concerns were expressed about the need to stabilize the beach ridge as cottagers have seen land there disappear due to erosion. Lastly, the Portage Diversion was talked about at length. Members of the community feel that the diversion is slowly ruining the quality of the beach.

The stakeholders perceived a strong role for the rural municipality in bringing the local municipal campground up to a provincial park standard. They felt that using the diversion less often would also have a positive effect on the beach. Lastly, it was suggested that the province and the municipality needed to create a comprehensive plan to fund erosion protection structures for the ridge.

Key questions:

- What would public access to the beach look like for the cottagers and others in the area?
- How can a formal recreational plan be developed?

5. *Provide opportunities for the general public to access the south shore of Lake Manitoba and recognize the role of the south shore as a recreational area.*

This policy deals with access by the public to Lake Manitoba. Already existing access points include a public beach (via the east and west points of the beach), the public campground at West Park and the trailer park. The participants said that there was a need for better public access to the lake for use by boaters and fishers, but many were not in favour of increased beach access because they prefer the quieter nature of a private beach. The comments pointed to the need for a comprehensive recreational plan for the Delta Beach area.

Problems named by the participants include inter-jurisdictional issues (e.g. overly restrictive regulations from Fisheries and Oceans); a lack of financial resources to expand access to the south shore (e.g. to create/maintain infrastructure or address the destruction of the shore by bad weather/nutrient overloading); restricted winter access; the disrepair of boat launching and docking facilities; and poor maintenance of East Beach Park. Proposed actions coming from the participants include increasing signage to make the access to the shore more visible, and cleaning up the existing access points. They also suggested that the docking facilities be improved.

Key Questions and Suggestions shared in Plenary:

- Create signage to inform people about public access to the lake.
- How to limit the damage resulting from the Portage Diversion (especially the sludge build-up in the channel)?
- Where to find funding to put in a proper marina for boating in the summer and snowmobiles/Bombardiers in the winter?

6. *In cooperation with other levels of government, institutions, community organisations and private citizens identify opportunities to interpret and communicate the physical, natural and historical significance of the south shore of Lake Manitoba.*

This policy was not directed to a group for discussion because only one stakeholder expressed a strong interest in the topic.

7. *Manage the introduction or expansion of human use and development within the south shore by ensuring proposals to expand seasonal resort, residential and recreational developments*



*minimize impacts upon the environment and natural features which are important to the long term health and sustainability of the south basin planning area.*

The discussion surrounding this policy dealt mainly with new cottage development in the south basin, as the term ‘seasonal resort’ refers to the zoning classification for cottages. Many stakeholders at the consultation are current cottage owners, landowners and potential cottage developers. The discussion centred on whether or not new cottages could be developed in the area without compromising the ecological systems in the south basin (particularly the Delta Marsh and Lake Manitoba). Participants wishing to develop cottages were concerned that there was a lack of available cottage lots despite the demand for recreational opportunities in the area. The underlying tension in the discussion was the difficulty of balancing protection of the unique physical features of the area and the desire to create new cottage opportunities. No clear consensus on the merit and risks of expansion emerged from the discussions.

An issue raised by participants in the discussion concerned the increased use of cottages as year round residences, and the related problems of sewage treatment. At present, these homes are zoned seasonal resort recreational. Participants suggested that these specific properties be re-zoned to residential.

Other concerns expressed by participants were the potential for conflict between cottagers and hunters and tensions between cottagers and the Federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans over water quality issues.

Stakeholders were able to provide many ideas and suggestions on how to solve or manage some concerns. One suggestion from the participants was that realistic limits on land development be established to ensure sustainable use of the area. They said that environmental impact assessment research on the effects of development could help set and monitor these limits. Participants suggested as well that the development of and use of low pressure sewer systems or a sewage lagoon for the cottage area would help manage the sewage issue for both existing and new cottages. It was also suggested that a potable water system should be introduced. They recognized that rezoning some cottage properties as residential would change the tax structure for those properties and perhaps generate a base for investment in sewage treatment. Finally, it was suggested that seasonal and year round rural residential policies be created to manage and monitor the extended use of cottages.

Key questions:

- What are the limits on hunting and farming? Are these left up to the Council?
- Future development for cottages: Is there a potential for eco-cabins and enviro-friendly waste management?
- There were many questions relating to jurisdiction and the need to clarify what the municipality could control (over holding tanks, permanent residences, etc.)

8. *Essential activities of government and private utilities including alternate energy generating systems such as wind energy generating systems should be permitted in any land use designation subject to requirements in a municipal zoning by-law. Such uses to be located and developed in a manner so as to maintain compatibility with neighbouring land uses.*

Most of the conversation related to this policy focused on wind energy generation, rather than on other alternatives. This is likely because there are two proposed wind projects within the secondary plan area. Wind power per se was not seen by participants as necessarily problematic, but various concerns and cautions were raised forcefully. The main theme running through discussions among participants was where the projects might be located, particularly in relation to the marshland and prime agricultural lands. Concerns raised by participants included the amount of land, particularly agricultural land, taken up by wind farm operations, the potential limitations on agricultural operations such as aerial protection/spraying of crops (particularly potatoes), and the impact of wind towers on migratory birds. Questions were raised about noise pollution, the impact of noise from wind farms on grazing livestock, and how the local municipality would directly benefit from the operations.

During the discussions, participants shared information and views about wind power and wind farms that was often contradictory, incomplete or very vague, leaving most participants feeling that not enough is really known for sure about the potential impacts or benefits.

Actions suggested by the group included concentrating the towers to minimize land use, using zoning and setbacks to locate the projects on community pastures/marginal/class 3 or lower lands to protect prime agricultural lands and the marshlands, and public awareness/hearings to share reliable information on the impacts and flow of benefits from wind farms.

Key questions and actions shared during the plenary:

- Where can wind farms be on agricultural land that won't be a detriment to the land?
- What are the benefits to the municipality and local consumers of energy?
- How can reliable and complete information be shared about the feasibility and various potential impacts of wind farms.

## Interpretation

The discussions and views expressed at tables and in plenary reflected an awareness among participants of the importance and fragility of the unique natural features and resources of the South Basin. The marshlands, beach ridge, water quality and animal life in particular were highlighted many times. Many of the concerns about current and potential future land-uses referred to negative impacts on these natural features and resources. This reflects the high priority given by participants to protection of particular aspects of the natural heritage of the region.

While generally supportive of the policies, participant observations and suggestions also reflected a nuanced approach to protecting these features and resources. Suggestions for clarifying the policies under discussion focused mainly on specifying where and how they are to be implemented so as to minimize specific impacts. Emphasis was also given to simple steps not requiring policy action (for example, signage and information sharing) and public investments to support the policies (for example, park and docking facilities, and public education). These views reflected the felt need among participants for **targeted** conservation measures and governmental and financial support for this general thrust in the policies.

Attention to the impact of the policies on economic life in the region focused primarily on the need to protect prime agricultural lands and improve the use of aquatic resources (by correcting the imbalance created by the carp population and nutrient loading). Support to policies that enable on-farm commercial activities and cottage development was clear among participants, so long as these activities do not negatively affect the key natural features and resources mentioned above. The same could not be said for **new** economic and commercial activities unrelated to current land uses. For example, support for wind farms was very cautious, reflecting unanswered questions about the public benefits of the investments (especially for the municipality and local electricity consumers) and the potential impacts of the wind farms on wildlife and farming activities (aerial spraying, livestock and crop operations). The strong opposition to wind farms expressed by some stakeholders reflects their livelihood concerns.

Discussion of one policy often made reference to features of another policy. Participants said that the policies are related to each other and overlapping in some ways. This relatively holistic and complex perspective may reflect the various interests and roles many participants play in the area (farmer and councillor; government representative and resident; fisher and cottage owner). An example of this was the frequent reference to the impact of the Portage Diversion on the natural features and resources of the South Basin. While this topic was not directly raised in the policies under discussion and cannot be addressed by a Secondary Plan, participants clearly felt that it is a major driver of environmental problems in the region and should be addressed in some way.

The wide-ranging discussion and participant efforts to address links and overlaps between policies may also have reflected the openness of many participants to hearing the views and ideas of others, and a genuine desire to come up with the best possible policies for the area. Participants said that they appreciated the opportunity to engage in a multi-stakeholder process that shared knowledge and gave a voice to broader concerns about the area.

While no discussion took place on the policy concerning “opportunities to interpret and communicate the physical, natural and historical significance of the south shore of Lake Manitoba”, public awareness strategies were included among a number of the suggestions for improving or implementing other policies.

## Action

The participants suggested a number of specific actions for consideration in the Secondary Plan by-law. These include:

- Minimizing impacts of development on natural features and processes
- New zoning categories for small-scale manufacturing on agricultural land to aid farmers
- The development of a comprehensive recreational plan for the Delta Beach area, including better signage, increased upkeep of the municipal campground, better public facilities, a boat launch, and better docking facilities.

The university team drafting the Secondary Plan told the participants that the consultation had contributed significantly to their understanding of concerns and perspectives of South Basin stakeholders. The team indicated that they would consolidate this information in a report, and build on it when drafting the Secondary Plan. The university team said that they would organize another consultation in the near future, before finalizing their draft. It was noted as well that the draft plan would be reviewed by the Rural Municipal Council and go through several other public and government reviews before being approved. Participants recognized that the views expressed during the consultation would also factor into deliberations regarding the plan by the Rural Municipal Council, many of whom were present during the consultation.

## Observations on the Process

Many more people than expected came to the consultation, a clear indication of the level of interest in the future of the Lake Manitoba South Basin Area and willingness to contribute to policy discussion. The participants represented a wide range of constituencies within the planning area – farmers, government officials, residents, Hutterites, cottagers, fishers, municipal councillors and recreational users. There was, however, a notable absence of women and local youth among the participants. It is unclear what effect these factors had on the consultation and the results.

The level of engagement by participants in the discussions was high and remained at a high level throughout the day. At the beginning there seemed to be some uncertainty about what the day would bring, but connections were built throughout the day and by mid-morning most people seemed relaxed and willing to share their views with others. Participants were by and large very open to new ideas, and were genuinely looking for the best solutions for the area. While feelings of trepidation remained for some about what the final secondary plan would contain and how it would protect natural features and their livelihoods people expressed appreciation of the opportunity to share their views and provide inputs into the planning process. Feedback on the consultation given during a closing exercise was mostly positive. Participants stated one word to express their feelings, as follows:

Over regulated	Concerned	Educated	Full brain
Anticipating	Interested	Future	Hopeful
Frustrated	Satisfied	Thankful	Sleepy
Comfortable	Aware	Informed	Curious
Enlightened	Happy	Wiser	Grateful
Nobody mentioned mosquitoes!	Challenged	Informed	TGIF
Interested	Anxious	Optimistic	Okay
Smarter	Educated	Thirsty	Interested
Aware	Complex	Knowledgeable	Tired
Positive	Concerned	Cool	Friday
Challenged	More	Good	Impressed
	knowledgeable	Knowledgeable	Curious

Some participants expressed very strong opinions on the policy referencing wind farms. Other participants became frustrated by what they perceived to be grandstanding, and were dissatisfied with what they considered a lack of balance and scope in treatment of that particular policy. This problem came to the attention of the university team late in the process although steps were still taken by the student-facilitators to ensure that other views were shared during table discussions. In retrospect,

greater attention should have been given to providing clearer instructions to presenters regarding their role as a voice for all views around the table. Greater attention could also have been given to engaging the participants at the table in a more deliberate selection of a presenter that all felt could convey their views in a balanced manner. This may have supported a fuller discussion of the need for alternative energy generating systems underlying the policy proposal.

Knowledge of the intent and features of a Secondary Plan was uneven among participants and many complained about the specialized and at times unclear language of the policies under discussion. This made it difficult for some participants to provide specific suggestions that easily translated into policy prescriptions. The consultation managed this difficulty by focusing discussion on broad categories of feedback (“problems the policy may encounter”, “suggestions on how to improve or implement the policies”). In retrospect, more attention could have been given to explaining the purpose and features of a Secondary Plan, either during the consultation or in material circulated prior to the consultation. A clear language rewriting of the policies may also have been useful.

Because of the large turnout changes in the process were needed to accommodate smaller group discussions (the Roman Carousel). One of the eight policies was dropped from the exercise and a fifth table created by splitting the largest table into two (one for each policy). This created a gap in the facilitation team. The team improvised by assigning the lead facilitator to one table and eventually recombining the split group once the first round of discussions were complete. The lead facilitator also allowed for longer discussions than had originally been scheduled. These changes created a cascade of other small problems in the process. The timing of each table discussion got out of phase with each other, the rotation of presenters from one table to the other became more complicated and the tidy color coding for policies and comments was lost. Adjustments were made along the way and in the end all tables received all presenters. A step designed to assess the level of support each table felt for the policies under discussion was dropped, to bring the event back to its original timetable. In retrospect, more preparation time by the university team before the event, including a mock practice, might have strengthened the facilitation process, sharpened the definition of roles, improved note-taking and the process itself.

Despite these problems, the ideas shared during the consultation were on topic and the discussion was rich in detail and meaningful commentary. Much new information and a range of perspectives came to light that had not been evident to the convenors and the university team. This suggests that the consultation achieved its primary goal: to mobilize people and their knowledge in a way that can contribute to strategic actions and decisions informing the Secondary Plan.